

WRITING EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS: generalizations vs. specific detail

Good writing includes both general statements and specific detail. Most beginning or developmental writers tend to use many generalization but very little specific detail, which makes their writing vague and confusing for readers. It is crucial that you learn how to create (write), organize, and balance both generalizations and specific detail in ways that make sense to readers and present your ideas clearly and precisely. Let's begin by learning what the difference between generalizing and giving specific detail actually is...

GENERALIZATIONS are statements that express overall ideas you want to communicate about a topic: a main point, conclusion, outcome of analysis, opinion, belief, value, observation, and other arguments and truths. General statements are the sentences that express your thesis, clarify the topic of a paragraph, and present the main sub-points or separate reasons that support a thesis or help develop a paragraph.

SPECIFIC DETAIL, on the other hand, refers to the necessary and relevant bits of information that combine to explain generalizations clearly, completely, and convincingly. Specific detail is the stuff that helps readers understand the reasonableness and validity of your generalizations—the answers to the questions of *what, why, who, where, when, how, and how many?* In other words, specific details are the reasons, facts, examples, comparisons, relationships, names, numbers, dates, descriptions, and sensory information you provide to explain your generalizations. Without these, generalizations don't make sense and leave readers confused, frustrated, unconvinced, and lost because they have no idea what you really mean and whether or not your generalizations are reasonable or valid.

BALANCING GENERALIZATIONS & SPECIFIC DETAIL is often the biggest challenge for writers. Most people don't have a problem coming up with generalizations; these kinds of statements are easy to create because they express the big ideas—the points you want to make, your opinions or conclusions about a topic, and the overall ideas you want to express. It's the details—which ones, how many, in what order, and so on—that cause writers trouble. It takes careful thought and attention to figure out what kind of details and how many of them to you need to support a generalization. The basic rule is this: details should be purposeful and intentional NOT random and rambling. That is, you should never simply list as many details as you can think of in a paragraph without thinking about how each one is connected or related to a generalization; each and every detail should be selected thoughtfully based on whether or not it helps to explain the writer's point, idea, opinion, belief, conclusion, etc. and is clearly connected to the purpose (thesis) of the piece of writing. Every detail should be included only because of its relevance and relationship to a generalization and because it helps to explain and develop the writer's purpose. A rambling, random list of details is always a bad idea; a writer should easily be able to explain and a reader should easily be able to see the reason why the detail is included.

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH: generalizations vs. specific detail in an expository paragraph

There are three reasons why Canada is one of the best countries in the world. First, Canada has an excellent health care system. Canadians believe that health and well-being are basic human rights and it is wrong to deny or withhold medical services from any individual for any reasons. Canadians may visit any doctor, specialist, clinic, medical center, or hospital at any time they feel it is necessary at no cost to individuals. Furthermore, Canadian health care supports the good health and lifestyle of all citizens by offering a broad range services to counsel individuals that promotes healthy lifestyle choices and discourages negative or harmful choices and substances, such as placing a very high tax on cigarettes. **Second, Canada has a high standard of education.** The educational system is one of the most demanding, rigorous, and high quality in the world. Massive government funding is provided to education to ensure that students are taught by well-trained teachers—highly respected professionals—who hold several degrees and earn one of the highest salaries among teachers worldwide. Students are strongly encouraged to attend college after high school, and both sectors' curriculums have been judged as significantly superior to standards in other nations. **Finally, Canada's cities are clean and efficiently managed.** Nearly all Canadian cities began as "planned cities" designed carefully before any building was constructed. Planning cities carefully and meticulously provides for the ample park land, natural landscape, strategically placed schools, residential areas, office and industrial parks, and medical facilities that characterize Canadian cities, which are also easy to navigate due to the "grid" pattern of roads that run north/south and east/west and make travel simple and efficient. **As a result of these three characteristics—health care, education, and planned cities—Canada is a desirable place to live.**

NOTE: This is an example of an EXPOSITORY PARAGRAPH.

Examples of DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPHS are on the Diction & Description handout.